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SUBJECT: NARCO-KILLINGS UPDATE

REF: A. (A) 07 MEXICO 6228
[1](#)B. (B) 07 MEXICO 6196
[1](#)C. (C) 07 MEXICO 5401

[1](#)1. (SBU) According to figures from the National Center for Information, Analysis and Planning in order to Fight Crime (CENAPI), there were over 2,400 organized crime-related homicides in 2007, compared to an estimated 2,120 in 2006. The majority of these killings continue to occur in states traditionally associated with narcotics trafficking, such as Sinaloa (385 executions in 2007), Michoacan (319), Guerrero (278), Chihuahua (215), and Baja California (181). It is estimated that approximately 300 of these homicides were law enforcement officials and 27 military officials. The death toll in January 2008, tracked by newspapers, was approximately 201.

December/January -- Violence Spikes

[1](#)2. (U) The end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 witnessed an unusually high level of armed clashes between narco gunmen and the government forces -- army and police -- in the central state of Zacatecas (December 29) and, more acutely, in northern Tamaulipas. In the former, seven police officers were injured and two were killed in an ambush staged to rescue three men arrested while transporting a kidnap victim. The attack was attributed to Los Zetas, the notorious hit team of the Gulf cartel.

[1](#)3. (U) Immediately following this attack, three separate incidents took place in Tamaulipas.

-- On December 29 the chief of police in Matamoros was killed by unidentified gunmen.

-- On January 7 a group of 13 gunmen engaged a joint force of army troops and paramilitary members of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) in Rio Bravo: 8 of the latter were injured, while 3 of the attackers were killed and 10 were arrested. Interrogation of the detainees revealed that this outfit was also part of Los Zetas.

-- The next day, January 8, in Reynosa, an unknown number of gunmen, identified as Zetas, opened fire on a unit of the Federal Investigation Agency (AFI) that was pursuing them, killing 2 officers and wounding a third.

[1](#)4. (U) Mexico's military forces have not come out unscathed. After a further 1500 federal police officers (mainly military troops seconded to the PFP) were deployed in Michoacan, a clash with cartel gunmen on February 6 claimed the life of Army Colonel Fortino Castillo Leon, the second highest

ranking causality of the GOM's counter-narcotics campaign.
(Note: The army also lost a Colonel on May 1, 2007 in the course of a drug fight in Guerrero.)

Drug-Related Violence Spreads to Mexico City

15. (U) Through most of 2007, Mexico City had suffered little violence compared to the levels observed in many other parts of the country. However, in December 2007, 4 people working at Mexico City's international airport were killed and decapitated, sparking fears that drug gangs were increasing their activities in Mexico City. The operations director of Jet Service was one of those decapitated, along with one of his staff members. All of the Jet Service personnel involved, including a disappeared member of the staff, checked goods arriving at the airport and had the right to enter cargo holds on aircraft. The fact that the men's heads were cut off along with their fingers suggests that the killers might have been seeking revenge against the victims for not handing over drugs that had been seized by customs (on December 12) or informing authorities where to find the drugs. The fear of narco-violence spreading to Mexico City was further supported on December 19, when the federal Attorney General's office (PGR) announced the arrest of six men with heavy weapons and a grenade launcher in Mexico City. At least 3 of those arrested were policemen. One was a member of AFI, while 2 others were members of the Mexico City police force.

16. (U) Moreover, in mid-January three men were arrested in Mexico City with shoulder-fired rockets, rifles and a submachine gun. Deputy Attorney General Jose Luis Santiago

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Vasconcelos -- a point man in the country's war on drug gangs and the official in charge of extraditing drug bosses to the U.S. -- said that the men arrested were plotting to kill him. He said the suspected hit men may belong to the Sinaloa Cartel, which dominates Mexico's Pacific Coast cocaine smuggling routes.

Bomb In Mexico City Blamed on Drug Dealers

17. (U) A bomb that exploded about 100 meters from the Federal District police headquarters has also contributed to rising concern about drug related violence in Mexico City. Investigators concluded that the bomb was aimed at a senior anti-drug policeman. Local press immediately speculated that the Sinaloa cartel may have had a role in the incident. The Sinaloa gang wants to establish itself in Mexico City but a series of successful raids on drug gangs have set back their efforts. In retaliation, the gang purportedly targeted the deputy head of public security in the Mexico City government for assassination.

18. (SBU) However, Mexico City's chief prosecutor Rodolfo Felix Cardenas, concluded that the attack was probably the work of drug dealers, not the cartels. The devices were homemade, and the initial investigation was drawing attention to an area of the capital known for drug dealing. Embassy security analysts agree with this hypothesis and note that the details released by police and security camera footage of the bungled operation suggest the bomber was a common criminal/drug-dealer and not one of the cartels' many professional hitmen. Nevertheless, security experts say the use of explosives sets a worrying precedent. The bomber, who was killed when the bomb he was carrying exploded, was Juan Manuel Meza, known as "El Pipen." He was identified by his brother who said that he had not seen him for six years.

9.(SBU) Prior to the incident, Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora had already maintained that drug trafficking cartels were operating in Mexico City. Joel Ortega, Mexico

City Secretary of Public Security, has also asserted that cartel members were living in residential areas of the city, blending in with the wealthy population that travels in luxury vehicles with security guards. On February 29, security expert Jorge Chabat told poloffs that there were definite indications of a cartel presence, which was not surprising given the large domestic market. Both embassy security analysts and Chabat also noted that three of Mexico's most wanted fugitives were arrested in Mexico City between August and September 2007: Juan Carlos de la Cruz Reyna, Sandra Avila Beltran, and Juan Diego Espinoza.

GOM Response

¶10. (U) Since our last report (reftel), federal officials have made a number of high-profile arrests and seizures. The capture of Alfredo Beltran Leyva -- a top ranking leader in the Sinaloa Cartel and brother of Arturo Beltran Leyva (the right-hand man of the cartel's leader "El Chapo" Guzman) -- by Mexican army special forces on January 21 represents the most important arrest since Calderon took office in December ¶2006. The following day, utilizing forensic analysis of communications equipment seized at the time of Beltran's arrest, officers from the PFP's Special Anti-Narcotics Unit arrested another 11 alleged hitmen working for the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico City. The gangsters were arrested in two raids on houses located in two upscale neighborhoods in southern Mexico City. The gangsters had dozens of high-power firearms and ammunition, including grenade launchers, machine guns, and around 40 bullet-proof vests. Officers also found a laboratory that was used to manufacture synthetic drugs. Federal officials confirmed that those arrested are members of the organization controlled by Arturo Beltran Leyva.

¶11. (U) The GOM's success with the Sinaloa Cartel has been matched by operations targeting the country's two other major drug gangs, the Gulf Cartel and the Arellano Felix organization (aka "Tijuana Cartel"). From January 2007 to January 22, 2008 the GOM claims to have arrested over 50 members of the Gulf Cartel. Separately, on January 17 in Tijuana, four senior figures of the Tijuana Cartel were captured and a "killers' training school" was discovered

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complete with an underground shooting range and an arsenal of weapons.

¶12. (U) Other noteworthy blows against the narcocartels since our last report (reftel) include the following:

-- On December 12, Mexican Army elements detained one of the top leaders of the Gulf Cartel along with three of his subordinates in an operation in the state of Tamaulipas. Marco Antonio Ramirez, aka "Tony la Palma" reportedly ran large-scale operations in the states of San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Queretero, Hidalgo and Mexico.

-- On January 12, 30 presumed Gulf Cartel enforcers ("Zetas") were arrested by federal law enforcement authorities in Coahuila and Campeche. Authorities seized drugs, high powered weapons, communications equipment and cars. The Zetas captured in these operations have been flown to Mexico City, where they are being held in high security PGR facilities.

-- On January 26 Hector Izar Castro "El Teto" was arrested. Izar was a former director of the municipal police in Rio Verde, San Luis Potosi, who switched sides to become a leader of the Zetas.

-- On February 7, in the Tamaulipas border town of Miguel Aleman, the Mexican military seized nearly ten tons of marijuana, 89 assault rifles, more than 83,000 rounds of ammunition, and a variety of other weapons. Also seized in

the operation were a number of trucks, camouflage uniforms, and weapons training gear. Five men were arrested in connection with the seizure and have been taken to Mexico City to be charged. The PGR says this is the most important weapons seizure in Mexico in 20 years.

¶13. (U) On January 31, Attorney General Medina Mora reported that since the beginning of the Calderon Administration, Mexico's security forces had arrested 20,996 people suspected of involvement in drug trafficking. Of these, he said more than 15,000 had been bound over for trial in the federal courts, suggesting that law enforcement authorities are developing sufficient evidence for prosecution in the great majority of cases.

GDF's Contribution

¶14. (SBU) Mexico City's government (GDF) is also making an effort to disrupt links to organized crime within the local police. In 2007, an average of 8 local policemen a month were jailed for committing serious crimes with the charges ranging from murder to armed robbery, grievous bodily harm, kidnapping, extortion, helping prisoners escape, blackmail, and sexual abuse. In 2006, only 5 policemen were sent to jail. The GDF's Deputy Secretary of Government, Juan Jose Garcia Ochoa believes efforts to clean up the police is one reason why the mayor of Mexico City, Marcelo Ebrard, enjoys relatively high approval ratings (up to 54 percent).

¶15. (U) The GDF can also lay claim to several successful seizures and arrests. On February 13, local police arrested 7 alleged criminals of the Sinaloa Cartel and transported them to a local Public Security Secretariat facility. According to police, the two vehicles carrying the criminals were initially stopped because they were being driven strangely, with strobe lights shining inside them. Police found sophisticated weapons inside their vehicles, including special bullets known as "cop killers," grenades, semiautomatic rifles, and bullet proof vests.

GOM's Counter-Narcotics Operations Press-On

16.(U) Meanwhile, the GOM continues to send federal forces into various states. On February 26, SEDENA officials announced that 1,800 additional military personnel would be sent to Tamaulipas at the end of February. The troops will augment the more than 3,000 troops already operating there combating organized crime as part of Operation Nuevo Leon-Tamaulipas.

¶17. (U) In March, the GOM plans to launch "Operacion

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Limpieza." Under this measure, federal authorities and the Mexican Army will inspect all privately owned aircraft entering into Mexican airspace from Central and South America. All such aircraft should land at 1 of 3 airports (Chetumal and Cozumel in Quintana Roo State and Tapachula, Chiapas State). A similar measure is planned for maritime vessels with the Mexican Navy playing a major role.

Are the Cartels Hurting?

¶18. (U) On February 22, local newspaper El Universal reported that representatives of Mexico's drug cartels approached senior military officials to negotiate an end to the hunt for their leaders and the attacks against them. In exchange, the cartels promised a reduction in criminal violence. The military reportedly rejected the proposal asserting it only emboldens them in redoubling their efforts to combat

organized crime.

¶19. (SBU) Jorge Chabat told poloffs that Calderon's CN strategy had recently shifted towards attacking the revenue flows of the cartels, focusing more on seizures and less on arresting cartel leaders (or "capos"). He compared this strategy to that of the Fox Administration, which targeted capos. He noted that Fox's strategy did not work and we only saw the emergence of new capos in their place. He is optimistic that Calderon's strategy of attacking both capos and the economy of the cartels will definitely have a significant effect.

20.(SBU) Embassy security analysts continue to believe that the GOM's CN operations are impacting the cartels operations, noting the number of seizures and arrests that have taken place. As a potential unintended consequence of the GOM's CN ops, there is increasing evidence the cartels are looking to cooperate more in the form of some kind of division of labor, with different groups specializing either in transportation, production, and distribution -- akin to what we have seen in Colombia. This scenario would present new challenges to the GOM. Chabat believed this was possible but was cautiously optimistic, maintaining the cartels would be easier to control and less violent under this scenario.

CN Ops Draw Criticism

21.(U) On January 23 President Calderon signed a decree, the Programa Sectorial de Defensa Nacional 2007-2012, which envisages keeping the army -- currently deployed in 10 states -- out on the streets for the remainder of his administration. The same day the decree was signed, the head of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) Jose Luis Soberanes, called upon Mexico's Congress to publish a timetable for the withdrawal of troops from the country's streets.

¶22. (SBU) PRI Senate leader Manlio Fabio Beltrones endorsed Soberanes' proposal January 25 and suggested that the Senate set a deadline of 18 months for the withdrawal of military troops. Beltrones said the army needed to be replaced by a special police force trained to deal with organized crime. Beltrones recognized that the army had performed functions beyond the current capacity of Mexico's police force but considered it unacceptable for the army to assume this role indefinitely. President of the Institute for Security and Democracy (INSYDE), Ernesto Lopez Portillo Vargas, echoed similar concerns to emboffs on February 22. Portillo said the longer the military was involved, the greater risk they ran of "contamination" by the cartels. As the military's role deepened, so too did the prospects of its members becoming compromised as either informants or converts to organized criminal organizations.

¶23. (SBU) Many leftist political leaders have also been critical. On February 22, PRD leader Manuel Camacho Solis opined to a visiting congressional staffer and emboffs that the GOM's CN operations were just a "show" by Calderon to boost his popularity ratings. He maintained the GOM was exhausting all of its good intel leads in its rush to produce quick results. He argued that Calderon needs to develop a long-term intelligence strategy. He predicted Calderon's popularity will start to wane when it no longer can deliver

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victories in the drug war. On February 28, PRD Senator Graco Ramirez Garrido who sits on the National Defense Commission expressed similar concerns to poloffs. He believes Calderon's plan to use the military throughout his term is "too long" and described the CN ops as a "militarization of the country." His solution, however, for dealing with the problem was to legalize drugs.

¶24. (U) Intermittent claims of abuses by security forces also undermine the integrity of the government's efforts. The National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) has launched two new investigations against into military operations that took place this year. On January 11, Victor Alberto de Paz Ortega, 17 years old, was allegedly driving in a truck with his friend when soldiers shot and killed him in Huetamo. SEDENA claimed the youth tried to run over the soldiers and the soldiers responded by shooting. The second investigation is related to an incident that occurred in February when Sergio Meza Varela was allegedly shot and killed by soldiers as he attempted to avoid a military checkpoint.

Comment

¶25. (SBU) Although narco-killings continue, an ongoing string of high-profile arrests and seizures suggests President Calderon's resolve has not wavered in taking this fight to the cartels. In the meantime, the GOM won adoption of judicial reform legislation that will give the security forces new tools to fight organized crime. It is also pushing forward on a package of public security reforms that would modify the entire police structure across the country to emphasizing internal affairs and other ways to professionalize the police. Ultimately, Calderon's objective is to train and empower the police to assume their rightful lead on all CN operations (septel).

¶26. (SBU) Calderon's efforts to combat organized crime have also bought him public support. On March 3 local newspaper Milenio reported on Calderon's approval rating at the start of 2008. According to the poll, 64% of Mexicans believe Calderon is doing a good job. At the same time, challenges remain. In the same poll, only 42% of those interviewed say that they have noticed improvements in the level of drug consumption and distribution due to Calderon's fight against organized crime. There is also evidence that some drug-induced violence is moving from the Southwest border to the heart of Mexico. Recent arrests/seizures in Mexico City, the reported assassination plot against PGR Deputy Attorney General Santiago Vasconcelos, and the February 15th bombing near Mexico City Public Security offices support this hypothesis.

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